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SUBJECT: ECONOMICS AND ETHNICITY IN CAMEROON'S WEST REGION

¶1. (SBU) SUMMARY: On a recent trip to the West Region, Ambassador spoke with Governor Pascal Mani, who said the region has not been badly hit by the global economic crisis. Nonetheless, he expressed concerns about a slowdown in the timber sector and the impact of the decline in coffee production on education levels. He downplayed prejudices about the region's dominant Bamileke ethnic group, who are widely seen outside the West as greedy business people. The West Region is one of Cameroon's wealthiest, and is highly agricultural. End summary.

Starting to Feel the Pain

¶2. (SBU) The prosperous West Region is heavily agricultural. Driving through the Region, every available inch of land appears to be used to farm staples such as corn, beans and onions. In a May 14 meeting with Ambassador, Governor Pascal Mani explained that the global economic crisis has not hit the West Region to a significant degree yet, although he expected it to affect business. Transport companies are hurting because much of Cameroon's timber, which has been particularly hard hit by the global crisis, transits through the West Region on its way to port.

Taking Advantage of their Wealth?

¶3. (SBU) Although this Region is one of the wealthiest in the country, the Governor was not convinced that the population is using its financial resources well. He insinuated that a lot of the money is used for short-term luxuries rather than to achieve long-term goals such as development and infrastructure. Many of the roads in the capital of the region, for example, are potholed or untarred, he pointed out.

Farming vs. Education

¶4. (U) Farmers began switching from planting coffee to general agricultural products such as corn, cassava, and beans when the price of coffee began to fall a few years ago. Coffee production in Cameroon is now down to 30% of its prior production, Mani said. According to the Governor, the greater diversification of agricultural products has had an adverse effect on children's education. Children skip school for long periods during the planting and harvesting seasons, which now occur multiple times throughout the year rather than in one period.

Ethnicity

¶5. (SBU) Mani debunked stereotypes of the Bamileke, the main

ethnic group in the West Region, viewed by many non-Bamileke as being unfriendly to outsiders and constantly searching for more wealth. The Governor (a non-Bamileke) felt that the Bamileke are very adept at finding market niches and exploiting them. He said he lives in harmony with this group and feels that many of the stereotypes are too harsh.

Comment

¶6. (SBU) Mani was informed and candid, asking the Ambassador intelligent questions about corruption, the business climate, and national politics. He also seemed to understand that, in order to attract foreign business, Cameroon must fight corruption and create a friendlier business climate.

Biographic Note

¶7. (SBU) Governor Pascal Mani was born on January 13, 1953 in Elig-Ngomo (Obala), Lekie Division, Center Region, Cameroon. He is married with four children. He is a practicing Catholic and his hobbies include farming and playing sports. Mani graduated with a B.A. in Letters and Human Sciences from the University of Yaounde, and is a civil administrator trained at the National School of Administration and Magistracy (ENAM). He has been governor since July 29, 2005.

Prior, he was Divisional Officer of Mfoundi Division in Yaounde from 2003-2005. Previous postings include Sub-divisional Officer of Dschang, Menoua Division, West Region (1988-1991) and Divisional Officer in Memo, Northwest

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Region (2001-2003); Ocean, South Region (2000-2001); Vina, Adamaoua Region (1996-2000); Mayo-Rey, North Region (1992-1996); and Mayo Kani, Far North Region (1991-1992). He was also Chief of Cabinet to the Governor of the Far North Region from 1983-1988. Although territorial command officers are supposed to be neutral, Mani (like many of his colleagues) had often attended rallies organized by the ruling Cameroon People's Democratic Movement (CPDM).
GARVEY